

Review

Animal Life and Nature in Singapore

edited by S. H. CHUANG

Singapore University Press, Singapore 1973.

Pp. xiv + 302, 34 text figures including 10 line drawings,
9 maps, 12 charts and diagrams, and 11 coloured plates.

Price: Singapore \$40.00

The arrival of this book on the Singapore scene is most welcome. For too long, keen naturalists in Singapore have had to be content with books on natural history which treated Singapore merely as a minor part of the Malay Archipelago.

It is true that the fauna of Singapore is basically an impoverished version of the Malaysian but, there are many interesting phenomena such as the adaptation of the fauna to artificial environments which can be better studied in Singapore than elsewhere.

The range of subjects included in this volume is wide. Besides chapters dealing with the animal life of Singapore, there are others which discuss the vegetation, climate, geology and the sea around the Island.

The change in the composition of the fauna of Singapore in the recent past is something which many of the writers have noted. They record the gradual replacement of some species by others, and mention these changes among both the vertebrates and invertebrates. As can be expected of a book compiled by ten different authors, the coverage given to each subject differs. Some have chosen to give broad general pictures of their fields, while others have chosen to highlight only certain aspects of their subjects. But whichever approach they chose to their subjects, the writers have all managed to produce articles which were factual at the time of publication. D. S. Johnson in particular has written a well researched piece about the changes in the composition of the bird life of Singapore in the recent past. In it he mentions the disappearance of the magpie robin and the increasing abundance of the mynah. He also makes observations on changes in the populations of crows, egrets, orioles and munias, and expounds some credible theories to explain these changes. He says that the widespread use of insecticides has led to a decrease in the numbers of insect feeders, and, modern grain handling methods which result in less spillage have led to a corresponding decline in the numbers of the birds which feed on spilled grain.

Similar changes in the sea life around Singapore have been recorded by Tham Ah Kow and S. H. Chuang in their chapters. In one, Chuang gives an interesting mathematical table showing the changes in the species of shells off Tanah Merah beach. Both Tham and Chuang write that the depletion of the marine life around Singapore is attributable to the increased pollution of the water.

R. E. Sharma has contributed a chapter on noxious and toxic animals. This chapter contains useful information for anyone venturing out to study nature in Singapore. In it, Sharma has mentioned practically every animal which could conceivably be a danger to human beings, and in many cases he outlines preventive measures which can minimise the danger.

Unfortunately, data for the book was collected up to 1969, and the authors could not possibly have foreseen the rapid pace of urbanisation in Singapore. Since that time, swamps have been filled in and forested areas cleared. The end result is that, while the book is currently still accurate as far as the various species of animals mentioned in it are concerned, their actual numbers should be regarded as an optimistic record. An example is the chapter by R. C. R. Morrell on butterflies and moths. In it he mentions that hawk moths are still fairly well represented in Singapore. This might have been true five years ago, but today, with the decrease in scrublands, increase in buildings and improved street lighting which attracts moths and makes them easy prey for bats and birds, hawk moths are certainly few and seen at longer intervals. His account of the butterflies here also tends towards optimism. While the species which he mentions are still to be found here, there is no doubt that their numbers have been greatly reduced.

The standard of photography is not as high as could be desired. Birds on Plate 9 are not shot artistically. Little attention is paid to background in Plates 3 to 9. As a result the photographs portray specimens in the laboratory rather than animals in life.

The treatment of "The Exploitation of Animals" is rather cursory. There are a few misnomers, e.g. "jambols" on page 253 are referred to "crested jays" which should have been "bulbuls".

Considered as a whole, this book is by no means comprehensive in its coverage but it does serve to give an accurate general picture of animal life in Singapore today. However, conditions here are changing so fast that it will come as no surprise if the material contained in it becomes outdated five years from now.

Despite the shortcomings, the book serves a very useful function. In it the authors have pointed out areas where there is plenty of scope for further study and research. It should therefore be considered more than merely a record of the fauna of Singapore and serve as the starting point from which students can undertake a serious study of animal life and nature in Singapore.

LEE CHU SAN
Grant Advtg International Inc.
Singapore